

2 ARTICLES APPEARED  
ON PAGE 1

## The Clean Machine Anti-Corruption Squad In Singapore Keeps Civil Servants Honest

### Foreign Firms Note Rarity Of Graft; Investigators Are Given Broad Powers

### A \$200,000 House—and Jail

By BARRY NEWMAN

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SINGAPORE—On his "festive rounds" one Chinese New Year, postman Idris Bin Abu accepts a red packet containing \$1 from a shopkeeper. As he turns to leave the shop, Mr. Idris is greeted by three officers of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, Singapore's corruption police, who arrest him.

A shop assistant presses a crumpled note worth \$25 into the palm of a policeman who has done him a favor. The policeman reports it to the bureau. The shop assistant is taken to court and fined \$1,000, probably more than three months' pay.

Asked for a \$5 payoff by a traffic warden, a motorcyclist quickly jots down the bill's serial number and heads for the corruption police. The warden's fine: \$1,750.

Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau translates into Chinese as "Foul Greed Investigation Bureau." Mention its name to one of Singapore's 135,000 civil servants and you will get a nervous giggle. Mention it on the telephone and the civil servant will think of an excuse to hang up.

#### Harsh and Effective

The bureau is housed modestly in an old Methodist church and employs fewer than 50 investigators, but it is thought of as Singapore's most feared enforcement agency. Its methods of extracting information are considered harsh (though bureau officials deny it); and it has a seemingly free hand to go after anybody suspected of corruption from cabinet ministers to spies. Like many other government endeavors here, the bureau is very good at doing what it sets out to do.

"If anybody is asking for bribes, we'll pick him up," says P. Rajaratnam, the bureau's director. "We investigate, we take them to court, we plug loopholes, we get results. We move around—all over. You want to keep Singapore corruption-free, you have to have your tentacles everywhere. We have an incorruptible government—everybody must be incorruptible."

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"Let's face it, they've done a good job," says a lawyer who has defended many corruption suspects. "There may be a bit of injustice here and there, but the end is worthwhile. I dare say our police force is the cleanest in the world. They've cleaned out the whole city."

Ever since the American Congress passed a law making it difficult to pay bribes abroad, U.S. businessmen have complained that they are being moralized out of the marketplace, especially in the graft-soaked Third World. The argument doesn't have to be made in Singapore, an island state of 2.3 million people (three quarters of them Chinese) and a sequin of probity on the soiled cloth of Southeast Asia.

#### "Incredible" Honesty

In two years as economic and political counselor at the American embassy, Arthur Bauman has heard of one American company being asked for a payoff, and at a very low level. "That's incredible," he says. Hughes Tool Co. just built a factory here. Charles Hay, who watched over the project, says, "We never experienced any graft. We never had an indication it exists."

The No. 1 anti-corruption zealot is Lee Kuan Yew. Mr. Lee, Singapore's hard-headed prime minister of 20 years' standing, has limited admiration for flashy politicians whose wealth seems to come from something other than pure public service. "Nothing more undermines a developing country's hope of success," he says, "than the doubt in the mind of the worker that all his energy is really to enrich somebody at the top."

Mr. Lee never has taken kindly to slights on his rectitude. A year after he took office, the American CIA tried to co-opt a Singapore intelligence officer. A CIA agent was arrested, Mr. Lee disclosed a few years later, and the United States proceeded to offer the prime minister and his political party \$10 million to let the man go. "The insult!" Mr. Lee said. "I told them, 'You can keep it.'"

#### Unwise Assumption

The agent finally was released for fear of political reprisals; the bitterness remained. "They think that Singapore is a small country and that her people can be bought and sold," the prime minister said afterward. "This is unwise." (In Washington, the CIA declined comment on the matter.)

When opposition candidate J. B. Jeyaretnam obliquely implied in 1976 that the prime minister was favoring his relatives' businesses, Mr. Lee sued for slander and won a \$60,000 judgment. Leong Mun Kwai, another candidate who wasn't so subtle, was found guilty of criminal defamation and jailed for 13 months.

But don't take the prime minister's sensitivity to mean that big fish never get hooked here. Last month the chairman of the National Trades Union Congress resigned from three of his top union jobs and was charged in court with filching union money. In 1975, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau grabbed Environment Minister Wee Toon Boon for accepting a \$200,000 house from an

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to say, "Charge my minister in court."

Singapore's corruption law, enacted way back in 1960, is what you would call comprehensive. It makes it illegal for anybody to give, take, promise to give, or agree to take anything at all for doing (or not doing) anything at all in connection with "any matter or transaction whatsoever, actual or proposed." It applies to the public and the private sectors, to payments considered "customary," and to every Singaporean whether he lives here or in another country.

Civil servants, in keeping with departmental regulations, need permission to attend a dinner put on by a company or an embassy. They need a clearance to have lunch with anyone who does business with the government. If a civil servant receives a gift, he must send it to the accountant general, who will put a price tag on it and sell it back to the lucky recipient. If the price is too high (it usually is), the gift is sold at one of the government's biannual auctions. Gifts of food are sent to charitable homes.

The corruption police will tail a civil servant who has a small salary and a large car, following him to nightclubs and gambling dens, totting up his debts. If the worker is living beyond his means, the investigators will want to know how he manages. "We don't harass, we don't disturb, we do it very carefully," says the bureau's Mr. Rajaratnam. "We're at the race track most weekends."

Around 100 bribery cases reach Singapore's courts in a year, and newspaper publicity induces a flow of anonymous tips. The bureau pays for information, but Mr. Rajaratnam says it doesn't hire spies; departmental supervisors form a built-in intelligence service, and the bureaucracy is mined against corruption. Customs men, for instance, must declare the money in their pockets when they arrive at work. The bureau raids regularly just before the men go home.

When things fall nicely into place, the corruption police perform their best maneuver: the ambush. A typical victim was Sgt. Yussoff Bin Hassan, an army cook who was accepting wilted vegetables from a grocer in return for a gratuity. The bureau got wind of this and picked up the grocer, Tan Hoo Seng. He sang, and agreed to set up the cook.

The next day, Sgt. Yussoff called to collect, and Mr. Tan handed over a few bills. Bureau men closed in, and the cook fled. He didn't get far. At his trial, he said he thought the men were gangsters. The judge didn't believe it.